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ABSTRACT

Examining student promotion standards in American education, the author reviews the origins and history of the shift between merit promotion (which advances students based on demonstrated skill competence) and social promotion (which advances students in response to their social needs). Case studies of promotional policies are provided for schools in Philadelphia, New York City, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Milwaukee; analyses of their promotional standards are based on seven criteria. While the national movement toward raising student promotional standards is based on the assumption that there is a relation between promotion and performance, the author outlines how research evidence is inconclusive. Current empirical literature on the subject leaves only one conclusion: there is no valid evidence demonstrating that either promotion or retention has any significant impact on low achieving students. Nevertheless, the author provides suggestions for implementing higher standards in promotional policies. Concluding that there is an absence of evidence clearly defining one form of promotional policy as most effective, the author points out that the choices must be made on the basis of social values. (MD)

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SETTING THE STANDARD

The Characteristics of Contemporary Classroom Teachers

EA 016 327

SETTING THE STANDARD:

The Characteristics & Consequences Of Alternative Student Promotional Policies

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CITIZENS COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC EDUCATION IN PHILADELPHIA

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FOREWORD

In June 1982 the Board of Directors of Citizens Committee on Public Education in Philadelphia (CCPEP) met to formulate its program agenda for 1982-83. One of the four areas chosen for in-depth examination was Promotion Standards, with the stated purpose of reviewing and supporting the planning and implementation of a promotion policy in the school system, starting with a review of an initial planning and pilot test of promotion policy in District 6 (Northwest Philadelphia).

We began with a visit to New York City to observe and discuss the Promotion Gates Program and followed up by scheduling visits to four Philadelphia public schools outside of District 6 with recently instituted school wide standards for promotion. These visits alternated with discussions with District 6 officials about the preliminary design of that program in which we spurred the planning of a summer school program for students in grades two, five and eight who would be likely to be retained in grade because their academic performance on criterion reference tests was more than two years below grade level.

After only a few months of exploration, it became clear to us that we needed a broader picture of the experiences of other cities with promotion standards to bring context to developments in Philadelphia. To fill this need we commissioned David F. Labaree, Ph.D., from the University of Pennsylvania's School of Sociology, to present an historical chronicle of promotion policies nationally and locally and to conduct a review of relevant descriptive and evaluative material about newly instituted promotion policies in other big cities.

This paper is the product of those efforts. To our knowledge it is the most comprehensive analysis of historical and current promotion policies now available. We are proud to have produced it and hope you will be eager to read it and to consider its implications for raising academic performance in Philadelphia and elsewhere.

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David F. Labaree

CHAPTER 1
THE PROBLEM OF STUDENT PROMOTIONS: ORIGINS, ISSUES AND POLICY ALTERNATIVES

The problem of promotional standards for students in its modern form dates from the founding of the common school system in this country in the early nineteenth century. Prior to this time public education was a small-scale individualized process under which each student advanced through a series of texts at his or her own pace, as determined by recitations with the teacher. In the absence of a peer comparison group, students experienced neither promotion nor retention but rather a solitary form of forward movement. With the arrival of mass public education, student promotions suddenly became an important social issue--the result of the graded structure imposed on the new common school systems.

Grading was a response to two forms of pressure exerted on the new school systems, one organizational and the other cultural. Organizationally the common schools were under intense pressure to develop a structure of instruction which was fiscally, socially and pedagogically efficient. The result was that they abandoned the inefficiency of the traditional individualized instruction in favor of the economies of scale embodied in the simultaneous instruction of an entire class. Since under this new technology the whole class learned the same material at the same time, the class could then proceed on to more difficult material as a group. Craft production gave way to batch production, which in turn led to batch promotion--cohorts of students of similar age and (presumably) similar ability moving through a progression of educational stages.

Culturally the new schools were under pressure both to embody and to transmit meritocratic values--particularly the belief that in American society rewards are allocated according to individual ability and effort, that inequality is earned. A graded school system constituted a hierarchy of inequality; and to the extent that a student's rise to each higher stage came on the basis of personal achievement, it was a hierarchy of merit as well. Thus concerns about both efficiency and merit led to the grading of schools; but this consequence was not without tension and the tension centered on promotion. The question was whether the primary unit of promotion was the class or the individual. The ideal case for educational efficiency is to move entire classes through each of the grades, like an assembly line with no rejects. The meritocratic ideal is to promote only those who have proven a sufficient level of achievement.

These alternatives embody different conceptions of the learning capabilities of children and of the goals of public

education. Batch promotion implies that, with relatively few exceptions, children are capable of learning the same material, although not always at the same time. The result is that schools are seen as being in the business of trying to move the great bulk of the students through its curriculum in unison. Individual promotion implies that students have widely varied capacities for learning, either because of differences in innate ability or differences in willingness to work for achievement. The result is that schools are seen as being in the business of trying to select the most able and willing students in order to propel them into higher forms of education while teaching the less capable students at less advanced levels.

Originating with the first graded schools, this conflict between organizational efficiency and meritocratic values, between the goal of group learning and the goal of individual selection, has been a source of continuing tension in American schools up to the present day. Over the years three different core strategies have been adopted in an effort to resolve the tension (they can and usually do overlap):

1) Social Promotion: This strategy represents the triumph of efficiency and group learning over merit and individual selection. In its pure form, social promotion means the automatic advancement of all members of a class from one grade to the next without regard for individual achievement. The effect is to create homogeneous age groupings. In the long run it is assumed that achievement levels will also converge.

2) Tracking: This strategy represents a compromise between the demand of efficiency and merit and between the expectation of group learning and individual selection. In its pure form, tracking means the differentiation of students into broad categories according to ability. Once this is accomplished, students within each group can either be socially promoted (constituting a kind of batch meritocracy) or subjected to promotional standards graded by ability (which also tends to keep promotional rates high). In any case, tracking introduces considerable organizational complexity, since a variety of curricula must be offered to each age group.

3) Merit Promotion: This strategy represents a stronger emphasis on achievement and selection than on

efficiency and group learning. While tracking leads to the advancement of batches of students through parallel curricula that are differentiated by ability, merit promotion leads to individualized promotional decisions within a single sequence of grades. In tracking, the curriculum adapts to the abilities of the students. In merit promotion, the student adapts to the curriculum. In the pure form, each student is retained, promoted or skipped forward a grade based solely on his or her proven ability as measured against a fixed achievement standard. Organizationally this strategy leads either to a wide range of ages within each class or to the creation of special classes for the retainees, which introduces further organizational complexity and which can lead to the development of separate tracks.

CHAPTER 2
MERIT PROMOTION IN NINETEENTH CENTURY PHILADELPHIA

Public school systems in the nineteenth century uniformly adopted the third strategy. Philadelphia in particular showed an overwhelming interest in establishing a meritocratic and selection-oriented structure of schooling and its promotional policies reflected this concern. The system had an exaggerated hierarchical form: while most districts had three grades of schools, Philadelphia had four (primary, secondary, grammar and high); while most districts had eight elementary grades, Philadelphia had twelve (because of half-year grades for the first four years of schooling). Its shape was that of a pyramid, with large numbers of schools at the lower levels, a much smaller number of grammar schools (one for each ward) and only two high schools (one for each sex). Students were selected for admission to each higher level of school on the basis of individual performance on written examinations. This succession of screening procedures culminated in the exams for admission to the high schools, and very few students made it beyond this point. Until the very end of the century, high schools accounted for no more than 2% of the students in the system--primarily because high school age students chose to enter the workforce but also because very few emerged from the selection process labeled as worthy of admission.

This promotional system was geared toward the needs of the city's best students; average students were unlikely even to seek admission to the high schools much less attain it. Yet the thrust of the system was not negative but positive. The extreme narrowing at the upper end of the educational pyramid meant that nonpromotion was too common to be shameful and that promotion was perceived as an extraordinary personal achievement. The rarity of attaining a high school diploma meant that this credential was invested with very high status value, and as a result it acted as a powerful stimulus for achievement by the better-than-average student. Students were motivated to compete for the honor of attending the high schools, and grammar school principals were motivated to compete for the honor of successfully preparing students for admission.

In some ways nineteenth century educators felt that this system of meritocratic incentives was all too effective in spurring student achievement. They worried that it might produce what they considered a dangerous malady, precocity, by encouraging children to experience mental overexertion at an early age thus causing psychological damage. In line with this thinking, the school board in the 1860s launched an all out attack on the practice of "cramming" for promotional exams. It eliminated some of the more notorious memorization subjects from the high school entrance exam and established maximum time limits for the amount of homework that could be assigned to a student each night (one and a half hours in grammar school, one hour at the secondary level and none for primary students).

CHAPTER 3
THE RISE OF SOCIAL PROMOTION

What made the nineteenth century system of merit promotion work was the extreme scarcity of high school education and the resulting ability of the system to motivate the city's best students to compete for admission to these schools. By the end of the century, however, these conditions were undergoing rapid change. After 50 years with only two high schools the board began building new secondary schools in the 1880s and by 1915 there were 13 of them. At the same time enrollments at individual high schools expanded rapidly: Central High School's student body grew from 500 to 2500 during this period. Increasingly high school attendance was no longer a rare event or a signal honor. The educational pyramid was being flattened into a form approaching a rectangle. Aiding in this transformation were two state laws, one (1887) requiring high schools to accept all qualified applicants and another (1895) establishing compulsory attendance for children under the age of 13 and encouraging the attendance of those between 13 and 16.

When most students could not afford the opportunity cost of attending high school, selective admissions served the positive function of spurring the ambitions of those who could. But when large numbers of families began to see high school attendance as the natural culmination of their children's education, tough promotional standards quickly came to be seen as punitive. In 1900 the school board dropped the 62-year-old examination requirement for admission to high schools, and seven years later it abandoned the exam required for promotion in the elementary grades. From this point on students were advanced on the basis of a principal's certification of readiness, a system which permitted greater flexibility in promotional standards.

As a result of these changes, after 1900 there was a gradual but steady shift in the district's promotional policy away from a merit standard in the direction of social promotion. The clearest indicator of this shift was the steady upward trend in promotion rates. Table 1 shows that the rate of promotions in the elementary schools rose from 82% in 1908 to a peak of 98% after the Second World War while the rate for high schools rose from 77% to 85% during the same period. This relaxation of the promotion standard over the first half of the twentieth century was supported by three related arguments.

First, educators argued that schooling should be structured around the learning needs and abilities of the great bulk of its students rather than focusing on selecting and grooming the most able. Leonard Ayres--whose book, Laggards in Our Schools, led the initial attack on nonpromotion--correctly perceived this argument

TABLE 1

Philadelphia Student Promotion Rates
1908-1982

Year	Elementary	High School
1908	82.0	NA
1915	83.8	76.7
1920	85.0	78.6
1932	91.3	86.0
1940	97.2	87.0
1945	98.2	85.0
1950	97.6	80.4
1958	97.2	84.3
1978	95.2	82.3
1980	94.9	82.3
1982	92.7	93.3

Sources: Philadelphia Board of Education, Annual Reports, Statistical Reports; Kelner, 1983; "Pupils Retained."

as part of an effort to redefine the basic character of education:

> What is the function of our common schools? If it is to sort out the best of the pupils and prepare them for further education in higher schools, then the most rigorous system, with the severest course of study and the lowest percentage of promotions and the highest percentage of retardation is the best system. But if the function of the common school is, as the author believes, to furnish an elementary education to the maximum number of children, then other things being equal that school is best which regularly promotes and finally graduates the largest percentage of its pupils. (Ayres, 1908, p. 199)

In these terms then traditional promotional policy measured the performance of the average student against a standard calibrated for the performance of the high achieving student, with the result that the average student faced a high probability of failure during his or her school career. In Philadelphia in 1919 the average student repeated twice during the elementary years, requiring ten years to complete eight grades. (Pa. Dept. of Public Instruction, II, p. 188) Ayres and his confederates asserted that this condition was simply unfair. In addition social promoters asserted that schools should not only adapt themselves to the academic abilities but also to the broader social needs of the average student. In practice this meant a shift from a curriculum-centered school, with its exclusive focus on intellectual development, to a child-centered school in which concern is shown for the social and emotional development of the student.

Second, educators argued that a zealous policy of nonpromotion seriously impaired the organizational efficiency of the school system. Partly in response to the rapid expansion of schooling at the secondary level, school administrators in the second decade of the twentieth century became enamored of the possibilities of adapting scientific management principles to help govern their increasingly ungovernable school systems. Cost effectiveness became an important goal and from this perspective extensive repetition--as reflected in a large pool of overage students--appeared wasteful indeed. Why should the taxpayers have to pay for ten years of schooling in order to produce an eighth grade education? Ayres hammered incessantly on the costliness of retention. He noted, for example, that Philadelphia in 1907-08 spent almost $900,000 to educate repeaters, which took up more than 20% of the total school budget. (Ayres, 1908, pp. 96-97) While during the nineteenth century the tension between meritocracy and efficiency had been

resolved in favor of the former, early in the twentieth century the emphasis shifted toward the latter.

Third, educators did not entirely abandon a concern for merit; to the extent that they sought to foster merit it was not by means of high standards and frequent retentions but through the institution of tracking. The interest in tracking developed out of the efforts of educational Progressives, who were concerned with preparing students for future occupational roles that were consonant with their differential class origins and ability levels. Differentiated curricula (academic, commercial, manual labor) were first introduced into Philadelphia high schools around 1890; then later, with the advent of psychological testing came special education classes and full-scale ability grouping. Increasingly merit selection became embodied in the process of placing a student within the appropriate track rather than in promotion standards, for once in the track the student was increasingly subjected to social promotion.

To summarize, the shift during the early twentieth century from merit promotion toward social promotion was accompanied by the following changes in the character of schooling:

from an emphasis on meritocracy to an emphasis on efficiency;

from a goal of individual selection to a goal of group learning;

from an assumption of differential capability to an assumption of equal capability;

from a concern with adapting the student to the school to a concern with adapting the school to the student;

from a focus on the best students to a focus on the average student;

from a fear of precocity (underageness) to a fear of retardation (overageness);

from a stress on testing to a stress on certification.

But as Table 1 shows, these were not abrupt changes; instead they were realized gradually over the course of half a century, without reaching a peak until the three middle decades. The implications of this gradualism are several. First, it appears that teachers and principals had a lingering preference for merit promotion--in spite of the strong support for social promotion

among leading educators--and they gave it up slowly and reluctantly. Practice lagged well behind theory. Second, the gradual ascent of promotion rates means that a large number of persons alive today attended schools in which promotional standards were considerably tougher than those which have prevailed in the past few years. To these citizens modern schools may appear to have abandoned all concern with rigor.

CHAPTER 4
THE REBIRTH OF MERIT PROMOTION: THE PENDULUM SWINGS

In the last two decades there has been a swelling chorus of complaints in this country directed toward the practice of social promotion in the public schools. The most frequently voiced criticism is that current promotional policies represent an abandonment by public schools of their once dominant concern with student achievement. The much-publicized decline in recent years of student scores on standardized achievement tests has led many people to question whether the schools are doing their job. Why, they are asking, should schools be advancing students to the next grade who have not yet mastered the skills being taught in the current grade? When high schools can graduate functional illiterates, something is clearly wrong with the structure of schooling. Social promotion is blamed for much of this deficiency in achievement, for the following reasons:

1) The lowering of promotional standards is seen as both reflecting and encouraging the more general decline of standards in American society.

2) Within a school system, a policy of social promotion is seen as symbolic of a more general lack of commitment to student achievement. Conversely, raising standards is seen as a diffuse expression of a school system's concern for achievement.

3) Setting low minimum achievement levels for promotion is seen as fostering low achievement expectations for the entire class. It is argued that lowering the floor for achievement at a particular grade level leads to a lowering of the ceiling as well, while a raised floor leads to a raised ceiling.

4) Promoting students who have not mastered the material for their grade level is seen as a form of dishonesty. Schools, it is argued, are thereby rewarding students for lack of accomplishment--which instills in them an inflated sense of their own capabilities and teaches them that one can indeed in this world get something for nothing.

5) Rigorous promotional standards are seen as a great device for motivating students, parents and teachers into a sustained effort for higher levels of achievement. The threat of failure grabs their attention--spurring the student to take his or her work seriously, the parent to be more academically supportive and the

teacher to focus on the student's particular instructional needs.

6) Promoting students according to age rather than demonstrated achievement is seen as a policy which ignores the significant differences in ability and application which mark students within a particular age group. Social promotion sees students as broadly similar in learning capacity and thus seeks to deal with them collectively; but critics charge that students are in fact distributed along an approximately normal curve according to learning capacity, which means that schools must make individual discriminations among them.

7) Social promotion is seen as a prime example of a more general problem within the schools, pandering to students. The critics charge that by promoting the unqualified, schools are adjusting their curriculum and instruction to the needs and wishes of the students when in fact it is the schools that should be setting the standards and the students who should be adapting to them. They understand it as the function of schools to lead students, not follow them. Critics see other examples of this trend toward students calling the shots in schools--particularly in the proliferation of electives in place of more rigorous academic courses and in the relaxation of discipline.

As the movement for tougher promotional standards has gained momentum over the last two decades, it has tended to shift its energies from the attack on social promotion to the establishment of four related types of educational reform:

1) Back to Basics: On one level this means cutting back a number of electives and special programs in order to increase the amount of instructional time devoted to the traditional academic subjects. At another level, basic skills are defined as something much narrower--namely, literacy and numeracy. Thus back to basics is a response to the perception both that schools have failed to take the time to teach the difficult subjects and that schools have failed to teach effectively even the most elementary subjects such as reading and arithmetic. Both forms of basics tend to be stressed in a school system undergoing a shift toward merit promotion.

2) Minimum Competency Testing: School systems recoiling from social promotion tend to lean heavily on testing in their effort to raise achievement. Standardized achievement tests--in-house or imported, norm-referenced or criterion-referenced--are typically employed to determine if a student meets the minimum requirements for high school graduation or for promotion from one grade to another. The aim of these tests is to establish minimum competency--does the student score above the promotional standard or not?--and the focus is on the most basic skill areas, particularly reading.

3) Retention: Typically, the student who fails to establish minimum competency in basic skills at the level set by the promotion standard is retained. School systems vary considerably in the degree to which they rely on standardized tests as a criterion for retention, and they also vary over whether the basic skills measured are core academic subjects (usually only in high school) or literacy and numeracy.

4) Remediation: Usually accompanying a policy of increased retention is a new and intensified program of remediation aimed at bringing the retained students up to a promotable level.

The change from social promotion to more rigorous promotion standards produces the following changes in the character of schooling:

from concerns about efficiency to concerns about merit;

from a focus on group learning to a focus on individual selection;

from an assumption of equal capability to an assumption of differential capability;

from an emphasis on adapting the school to the student to an emphasis on adapting the student to the school;

from concern about the average student to concern about the poorest student;

from worry about overageness to worry about underachievement;

from a stress on certification as the basis of promotion to a stress on exit testing.

The first four of these changes represent a return to the nineteenth century meritocratic model of schooling, demonstrating that the nostalgia which pervades the rhetoric of the movement toward promotional standards is more than a vague yearning but reflects a real swing of the educational pendulum back toward an earlier form. Each of these changes is a simple reversal of a change brought about by social promotion over the course of the twentieth century. (See the list of the latter changes in chapter 3.)

School systems which have adopted some form of more rigorous promotional standard are rejecting the twentieth century claim for the importance of efficiency in schooling in favor of the nineteenth century claim for the primacy of merit. One need only note that establishing such a promotional standard with all of its ramifications is an enormously expensive proposition, yet even in times of fiscal constraint one system after another is plunging ahead with the reform. The argument is an old one, that schools should be (as they once were) in the business of fostering achievement. Having lost sight of their initial goal, schools are seen as having placed students on a kind of academic dole which rewards competence and incompetence alike, removing all incentive for improvement. Following another old line of argument, reformers argue that the installation of a merit-based promotional ladder will motivate students to pursue achievement. Other features of schooling under the new form of merit promotion match features of schooling under the old form, including an orientation toward selection on the grounds of differential capability, a preference for curriculum-centered instruction and the adoption of a less flexible stance toward students.

However, there is a great deal more to the promotional standards reforms than a return to the old days of schooling. Too much about the structure and process of education has changed in the course of this century for such a complete return to be possible. In the contemporary case studies presented in chapter 6, I will be discussing in detail the character of the new promotional systems. But for now a few general differences between the old and the new versions of merit promotion should be noted. While the old system focused resolutely on the needs and abilities of the superior student, the new promotional standards focus instead on the poorest student. The aim is to teach the most basic skills to these students in order to raise them to a minimal level of competency--so that a high school graduate, for example, will at least be functionally literate. By contrast nineteenth century school systems, such as in Philadelphia, ignored the slow students while seeking to stimulate the top performers to pursue the highest

level of achievement by climbing to the apex of the education pyramid. Their only fear was that they might over-motivate and over-stimulate such students so that the latter might climb too far too early, leading to precocity. But the problem which worries officials in the new merit-promotion school systems is not overachievers but underachievers.

A third difference between the two promotional standards, related to the first two, is that while both use testing as the criterion for promotion (compared with promotion by certificate during the intervening period), the character of the testing was quite different. During the nineteenth century the critical high school entrance exams that spurred such competitive fervor were designed to determine who would be admitted to the high school, not who would be retained in the eighth grade. In the days before compulsory education and the decline in dropout rates, a person who failed the exam simply went to work. However, now students are compelled to stay until they are 16 and normally remain through graduation. As a result testing today serves the function of guarding not the entrance but the exit to each grade level. In order to leave the first or fifth or eighth grade, a student must pass a minimum competency test or else be compelled to repeat the grade.

This is not simply a semantic difference. It reflects the radically different shape of schooling in the 1980s compared with the 1850s. In the latter era the school system was an elongated pyramid in which only a small number of students achieved a position at the high school while a larger number clamored for admission but failed to pass the required exam. In our own era, the systems have a more nearly rectangular shape, and as a result a high school diploma--the ultimate incentive offered by public schools--is no longer a particularly rare, valuable or attractive commodity. An educational pyramid still exists today, but it has been extended upward well beyond the reach of city school systems. In the 1980s it is the professional schools of medicine, law, business and engineering which offer the same combination of exclusiveness and marketability that the city high school did in the mid-nineteenth century. They have the same kind of stimulating effect on college undergraduates that the high school once did for grammar school students.

But the apex of today's educational pyramid--that critical device for motivating students in a meritocratic system--is too far removed from the average student in high school, much less grade school, to provide him or her with a realistic goal to aim for. I conclude from this that modern meritocratic promotional

standards lack the positive incentive toward upward mobility that was provided by the old meritocratic system which once propelled students to seek admission to the high school by passing a test as do students today who seek to enter medical school. The incentive that today's public school students have for passing the promotional test is, in contrast, a negative one. They do not want to be held back.

The table below summarizes characteristics of the three systems of student promotion:

OLD MERIT PROMOTION	SOCIAL PROMOTION	NEW MERIT PROMOTION
Academic merit	Organizational efficiency	Academic merit
Individual selection	Group learning	Individual selection
Differential capability	Equal capability	Differential capability
Curriculum centeredness	Child centeredness	Curriculum centeredness
Focus on best student	Focus on average student	Focus on poorest student
Concern about overachievement	Concern about overageness	Concern about underachievement
Positive motivation to achieve	Lack of motivation to achieve	Negative motivation to achieve

CHAPTER 5
SOCIAL PROMOTION, RETENTION AND ACHIEVEMENT: FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE

The recent movement for higher promotional standards received its initial impetus and its continuing strength from the desire to raise student achievement levels. Proponents argue that competency-based promotion will spur achievement while automatic promotion stifles achievement. Since social promotion was slow in establishing its dominance and since retention never was completely eliminated, there has been ample opportunity for social scientists to determine which form of promotion engenders the highest level of achievement.

Jackson's thorough review of the literature in 1975 turned up 44 studies on the effects of retention vs. promotion, and a March, 1983 ERIC search unearthed another 10 studies completed more recently. Unfortunately, despite the volume of research produced about the subject, there are no reliable and definitive findings which could serve as the basis for policy. Jackson's conclusion about the literature still holds: "the accumulated research evidence is so poor that valid inferences cannot be drawn concerning the relative benefits of these two options." (1975) The problem was not that the studies failed to come up with findings favoring one alternative or the other, but that more often than not these findings were invalidated by flawed methodology.

Jackson found three types of research design used in these studies--one biased toward showing the benefits of promotion, one biased toward showing the benefits of retention and another with no bias one way or the other. Studies of the first type compare the attitudes and performance of students promoted under normal policies with those retained under normal policies. Of course, since those students who were retained were generally having more difficulty with their school work than those who were promoted, it is hardly surprising that these studies show the promoted students faring better. This outcome is more plausibly attributed to the prior achievement levels of the students than to the impact of promotion or retention.

The second type of study compares the attitude and performance of retained students before and after retention. While the first design fails to control for prior achievement, this design fails to control for maturation. It is predictable that these studies would find that student achievement improved over the course of repeated year in grade, since one would naturally expect student to learn while they are in school--whether they are retained or promoted.

The unbiased third design type is the only one which controls for both of the identified threats to validity. In this design students are experimentally assigned to promotion or retention and

then changes in attitude and achievement are measured. Thus the prior state of the subjects is similar and they experience the same period of maturation; as a result, the only factor that differentiates them is the experimental treatment--the fact of being promoted or retained. Unfortunately, this kind of carefully controlled study is extremely rare. Jackson found only three examples, and these produced contradictory results. Thus the only valid findings are inconsistent while the consistent findings are invalid. Jackson calls for more studies of the third type in order to bring the promotion-retention debate to an empirically supportable conclusion, but this appears unlikely to happen because of ethical problems with the procedure. If a researcher feels that assigning a student to one or the other of these treatments might have a negative impact on that student, then the experiment is difficult to justify. And if as a result, valid studies of the effects of promotion and retention are unlikely to be carried out, then there may never be any empirical resolution to the debate over which is most beneficial.

Given the inconclusive character of the evidence, is there any contribution which the empirical literature can make to the current debate about promotional standards? Consider the stands taken by the writers of the six major literature reviews published in the last ten years. Significantly, not one of these writers adopts a position in support of retention. Three remain neutral on the policy question (Jackson, 1975; Selden, 1982; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1981) while one, prepared for the Philadelphia school system, mildly favors social promotion (Reiter, 1973) and two others strongly support social promotion (Thompson, 1980; Haddad, 1979). The lack of support for retention is understandable. Since social promotion represents the status quo, the burden of proof naturally falls on the supporters of a change toward tougher promotional standards; and no such proof currently exists. But there is no proof favoring social promotion either. Therefore the three writers who favor social promotion do so not on the grounds of the demonstrable achievement gains which come from promoting students but on the grounds of the potential social harm that might be caused by retaining them. This is less an empirical conclusion than a simple value assertion.

Selden argues convincingly that it is in fact values rather than evidence which provide the only basis for a firm position on the issue of promotion vs. retention:

> As a result of the scanty empirical evidence, promotion policy debates in the 1980s will be held not between competing data-based positions but between competing value positions. Supporters of continuous promotion will probably

emphasize students' emotional and social needs, and supporters of grade standards will probably emphasize the value of academic achievement. And the values of the grade standards policy are currently on the ascent. (1982)

CHAPTER 6
CASE STUDIES OF CITIES WITH MERIT PROMOTION

In the past few years the school systems in a number of major cities have adopted some form of merit promotion. In this section I will briefly examine the character and consequences of the new promotional standards in a few of these cities. Where possible I will try to analyze each city's experience with the new policy in terms of the following criteria:

1) The rigidity of the promotional standard: The key issue here is whether the standard is posed in terms of standardized test scores (an inflexible criterion), grades assigned by the teacher (more flexible) or multiple criteria (most flexible of all).

2) The validity of the retention criteria: Of concern is both the instructional and curricular validity of the device used for measuring student promotability. How closely related are the skills being tested to the skills contained in the curriculum and the instruction received in the classroom?

3) The balance between retention and remediation: Another important way of characterizing promotional policies is according to whether the emphasis is placed on holding back low achievers or on providing them with special remedial instruction.

4) The decision to recycle or track retained students: Do retainees simply repeat the same class or are they put into a special class with other retainees?

5) The handling of multiple holdovers: The question is whether there is a policy defining the number of times a student can be held over and how to deal with a student who reaches the limit.

6) The degree of centralization embodied in the policy: To what extent is the hand of the central administration strengthened by the process of reforming the promotional system?

7) The impact of the new policy on student achievement: Do achievement levels rise in the wake of the policy, and if so should the rise be attributed to the policy itself or to other factors?

I will examine the experience with strengthened promotional standards in five cities--New York, Baltimore, the District of Columbia, Chicago and Milwaukee.

NEW YORK

The history of the establishment of a system of merit promotions in New York City--known as the Promotional Gates Program--is unique in several ways. Out of all cities I examined, New York established the most inflexible and test-bound standard for promotion and the strongest commitment to remedial instruction as a balance to retention. In addition this was the only system studied which made a determined effort to evaluate the effects of the program. As a result I will discuss New York in more detail than the other cities. Data are available only for its first full year of operation, so I will be focusing on the period from spring, 1981 to spring, 1982. The discussion is primarily based on four reports issued by the Office of Educational Evaluation in 1981 and 1982. (Summer School, 1981; Staff Training, 1981; Mid-Year, 1982; Final Evaluation, 1982)

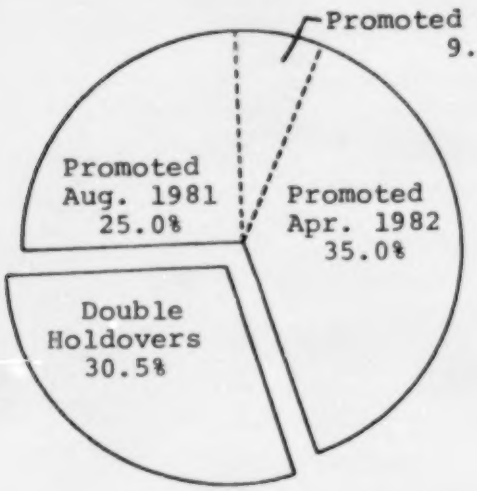
The essence of the program is to erect promotional gates at the end of the fourth and seventh grades and require students to pass through these gates in order to move on to the next grade. The measuring device used was the California Achievement Test (CAT), the focal skill area was reading and the standard was fixed in terms of grade equivalents: in April, 1981 the passing score was 3.7 for fourth graders (one year below the national norm) and 6.2 for seventh graders (one and a half years below the norm). (The initial regulations promised to add math to the skills being tested and to replace the CATs with an in-house criterion-referenced test, but these proposals did not affect the first year of operation.) Of all the Gates-year students who took the test in April, 1981, about 22% failed to meet the minimum standard, 17% of the fourth graders and 26% of the seventh graders. With a few exceptions all of these were slated for retention. The CATs were administered to these students three times during the following year--August, 1981; January, 1982; and April, 1982--and at any one of these times a student earning a score above the minimum could win promotion to the next grade. (The standard was raised in January in order to discourage mid-year promotions, but at the other two testings the original standard was kept.) Figure 1 shows the number of Gates students who were promoted at each occasion: overall, 25% moved up

FIGURE 1

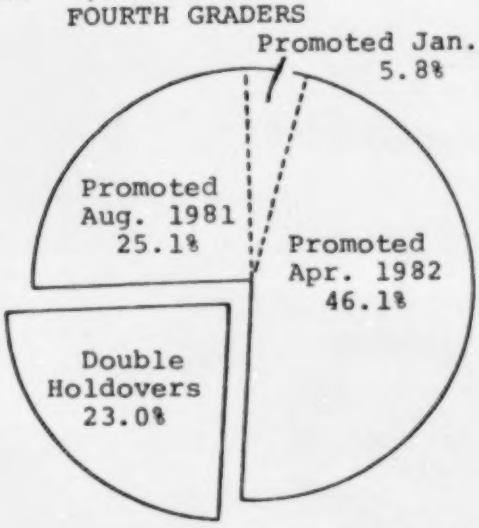
Attainment of Promotional Criteria

New York City

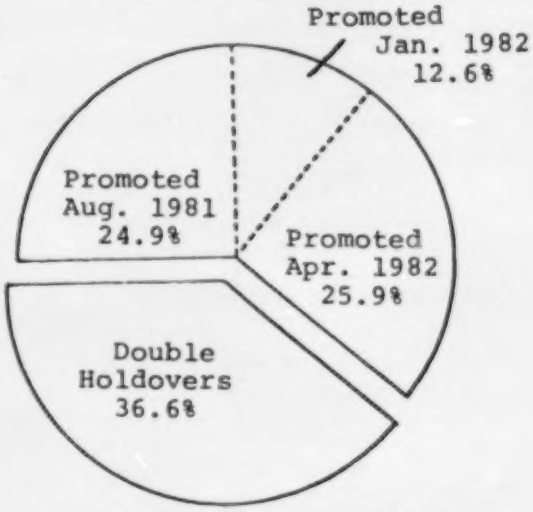
TOTAL: 18,653 GATES HOLDOVERS*



TOTAL: 8,434 GATES-ELIGIBLE FOURTH GRADERS



TOTAL: 10,219 GATES-ELIGIBLE SEVENTH GRADERS



*All totals indicate Gates-Eligible Students with pre- and posttest scores on the CAT.

Source: Final Evaluation, Figure 2.

in August, 10% in January and 35% in the following April, leaving 30% to be held over for a second year. More seventh graders became double holdovers than fourth graders, 37% to 23%.

New York's promotional standards during the first year were extraordinarily rigid when compared with other cities. A student who scored below 3.7 or 6.2 on the CATs had to be retained, no matter what his or her grades were; fewer than 500 students out of the 24,000 who failed to meet the standard in the April, 1981 test were exempted from participation in Gates by the Office of Promotional Policy. (The criteria for exemption were relaxed somewhat in the second year of the program to include factors such as other tests and teacher's judgment, which led to a sharp increase in the number of students exempted.) A single grade-equivalent score for a single skill from a single administration of a single test appears to be a tenuous basis to use for compelling a student to repeat a year of school. Any achievement test score should be viewed statistically as a rough estimate of a student's true ability and thus is best expressed as a confidence interval rather than a single figure. By using a cutoff point rather than a cutoff range, New York guarantees that a number of the students who pass have true scores below the cutoff while a number of those who fail have true scores above the cutoff. The August retesting gave students who failed to meet the standard a second chance to pass before being held over, but the issue is that the standard itself is not a valid basis for a pass/fail decision.

Not only is New York's CAT standard statistically invalid as a basis for promotional decisions, but its instructional and curricular validity are also in question. The problem is this: how closely related are the specific skills tested by the CATs to the skills that students were working on in their individual classrooms? It is hardly valid or fair to evaluate what a student has learned on the basis of a test measuring what he or she has not been taught or at least has not been exposed to in that particular form. National standardized tests are so abstract in their connection with particular curricula and instructional practices that their validity as measures of student learning should always be suspect. (Of course, one way of increasing the validity of such tests is to redesign instruction to fit the demands of the test; this problem will be discussed in the conclusion.) Tests designed by a school system to cover the curriculum of that system provide more valid measures, while tests designed by the student's teacher are instructionally the most valid of all. (Haney and Madaus, 1978) Of course, the latter form of testing fails to provide the kind of uniformity of promotional standards that is generally sought by school districts

which are looking to raise standards. This makes the city-designed curriculum-based achievement test the optimal compromise between the demands for instructional validity and uniformity of standards. (The related problem of examining only one skill area, reading, is part of the broader problem arising from a basic skills orientation; this will be discussed in the conclusion.)

By far the most positive characteristic about the Gates Program was the very strong commitment by the school system to provide special instructional support to the students who were retained. Gates students were put into special small classes where they received concentrated instruction in carefully selected language and math curricula. The system expended an extraordinary amount of time, effort and money on the instructional component, underscoring the seriousness of the often-repeated assertion that this program is intended to raise achievement levels, not punish underachievers. There was a careful process of curriculum selection, teacher training, oversight and evaluation. Even a city-wide summer school was established. The evaluation reports dwell at length on all of these processes, stressing their importance within the overall program.

A chronic problem in a retention policy is what to do with students who have been retained several times. The knottiest case for the Gates Program is the seventh graders, where double holdovers are numerous and where students are approaching dropout age. For those who repeat a second time the year is spent in a Gates Extension Program in which instruction shifts toward the vocational. Students who fail once again to score 6.2 can then be "advanced" to a high school where they join a special Gates Extension class. In short, triple holdovers are placed in a slow track and then socially promoted.

Another consequence of a promotional standards program--which, depending on one's point of view, can be viewed either as positive or negative--is organizational centralization. While New York has a turbulent recent history of struggle over community control of the schools, the Gates Program has the effect of strengthening the influence of the central administration. Gates was a central administration program from the start; in contrast with the decentralized character of many other city programs, Gates was initiated, funded, supervised and evaluated from 110 Livingston St. But perhaps the most important centralizing influence of all comes from the mere existence of a single city-wide promotional standard, which forces individual teachers, principals and community superintendents to fall in line by adjusting instruction to the demands of this standard. In spite of this centralizing influence the program has

engendered surprisingly little opposition from groups supporting community control.

The bottom line for any promotional standard policy is whether it succeeds in boosting student achievement. The school system produced an evaluation of the results from each of the three test administrations during the first year of the program, focusing on this issue among others, but unfortunately these studies could not establish that the policy had a significant impact on achievement. The first two reports are inconclusive because of serious methodological deficiencies, and the more rigorous final report shows no net gain in achievement that is attributable to the new promotional policy. Any attempt to reach valid conclusions about the effects of this policy on student achievement must first rule out three alternative explanations for any observed rise in such achievement. Two of these--maturation and prior achievement level--were identified by Jackson as factors which must be taken into consideration in any study of the impact of promotional standards; the third--regression--arises as a result of the test-orientation of the New York program.

Maturation refers to the expectation that students in school will on average increase their level of achievement over time whether or not they are involved in a special program. The question therefore is not whether students in the Gates program made gains but whether their gains were significantly greater than those made by socially promoted students over the same period of time. To answer this question the evaluators must establish a control group of non-Gates students for the purpose of comparison. In addition if the comparison of final achievement scores between the Gates students and the control group is to be valid, one must adjust these scores to take into account differences in prior level of achievement. Students with higher pretest scores are likely to have higher posttest scores as well, independently of their participation in the Gates program. A statistical adjustment of the scores permits a comparison of the net gain in achievement due to each promotional policy.

A third source of invalidity in evaluating the effectiveness of Gates is regression, which arises as a result of the statistical properties of the testing procedure. Since a CAT score is merely a point estimate of a student's true achievement level, the score will fluctuate from one test administration to another within a predictable probability range. Thus if the lowest-scoring group of students is tested again, their scores on average will regress toward the mean, which in this case means they will rise. This

would occur even if their true achievement levels were unchanged because in effect there is nowhere for the fluctuating scores to go but up. The average Gates student gained about four or five months between the April and August test dates, but only part of this gain is attributable to instruction; the rest is due to regression. Put another way, 25% of the April holdovers passed the August test; but the effect of the Gates summer school on this figure is unknown since many of these students would have passed anyway even if the retest had been given a few days after the original administration. It is possible to adjust test scores for regression and the final Gates report does so, but (as the report notes) the validity of these adjustments is also open to question--especially in a population subject to periodic attrition such as the Gates group. Once again a control group provides the most secure way of eliminating this explanation of achievement; since retest scores in both groups would be inflated by regression, one could attribute the difference between them in net achievement gain to differences in policy.

If a control group spells the difference between a valid evaluation and an invalid one, then the question becomes what kind of control group to construct. In the ideal social experiment, as Jackson suggests, students would be assigned randomly to the old program or the new. However, since the school system was arguing that the new policy was more beneficial to students, they were understandably reluctant to assign some students to be subjected to a less beneficial program. In the absence of pure experimental conditions, the evaluators constructed a comparison group from historical data. This group consisted of those students in grades four and seven from the year prior to the initiation of Gates who scored below the Gates minimums on the CATs that year. Under the old promotional policy only 22% of these students were retained while the remainder were promoted into grades five and eight. A comparison of the Gates students and control students thus allows for reasonably good test of the effects of retention vs. social promotion.

Unfortunately comparison group test scores are available only for April, 1980 and April, 1981, since before Gates the CATs were given just once a year. This means that the evaluations of the August, 1981 and January, 1982 test results could provide no comparative data. Both of these reports show sizeable gains in student achievement, but there is no valid basis of attributing these gains to the Gates program: they could just as easily be the result of extraneous causes such as maturation, regression and prior achievement. Neither the August nor the January reports makes strong

claims for the data presented, and the latter document even warns about some of the problems in interpreting the results. Yet I wish to argue that any publication of such figures without including strong disclaimers as part of every table and every interpretive discussion is by nature misleading. In effect each disclaimer should say, "Although Gates students are shown here as making achievement gains, we have no idea if these gains are the result of the Gates Program." Of course it is probably unrealistic to expect an in-house evaluation to adopt such a course. Establishing a policy of raising promotional standards requires a considerable amount of organizational mobilization, professional commitment and individual salesmanship. Therefore, especially in its early days, such a program is seen within the system as requiring nurturance rather than critical examination, and in this context strong disclaimers appear unduly negativistic. However, the publication of data on achievement gains under the Gates Program without controls or disclaimers leaves the outside reader with the impression that the program is responsible for the gains--when in fact there is no way of knowing if this is true.

Let us, then, turn to the report of the April, 1982 test results where a more rigorous analysis was possible. The overall outcome at the end of the first year--after adjusting for regression but not for maturation or prior achievement--is heartening. Fourth graders who qualified for Gates in April, 1981 gained an average of seven months by April, 1982, rising from 3.4 to 4.1; seventh graders gained a full year, rising from 5.4 to 6.4. ("Final Evaluation," Table 27) When a comparison group is introduced the picture becomes more complex. Table 2 shows the proportion of Gates students and of the comparison group who met the promotional criteria after one year. Students who spent a full year in Gates (and thus were still in grades four and seven in April, 1982) were matched with students from the comparison groups who likewise had been compelled to repeat those grades. Gates students who were promoted in August or January into grades five and eight were matched with students from the comparison group who were socially promoted to the same grades.

One can see that the Gates students who repeated grades four and seven for a full year were only slightly more successful at surpassing the promotional standard than the comparison group repeating the same grades, seventh graders (44% vs. 37%) more so than fourth graders (72% vs. 70%). But since 70% of the Gates students were held over for a full year while only the lowest 22% of the comparison group were retained, one would have expected the Gates students to have done better. After all, they must have

TABLE 2

New York City

Criteria Attainment by Gates and Comparison-Group Students

Grade	Group	N	Test date	Promotional criteria	Met Promotional criterion		Did not meet promotional criterion	
					N	%	N	%
Four	Gates	5,118	April, 1982	3.7	3,706	72.4%	1,412	27.6%
	Comparison	1,502	April, 1981		1,050	69.9	452	30.1
Five	Gates	2,078	April, 1982	4.7	1,086	52.3	992	47.7
	Comparison	5,412	April, 1981		1,571	29.0	3,841	71.0
Seven	Gates	5,922	April, 1982	6.2	2,583	43.6	3,339	56.4
	Comparison	1,494	April, 1981		549	36.7	945	63.3
Eight	Gates	3,282	April, 1982	7.2	1,899	57.9	1,383	42.1
	Comparison	8,720	April, 1981		3,458	39.7	5,262	60.3
Total	Gates	16,400	April, 1982	--	9,274	56.5	7,126	43.5
	Comparison	17,128	April, 1981	--	6,628	38.7%	10,500	61.3%

NOTE: The analysis of Gates students includes those with April or August, 1981 pretest scores and April, 1982 posttest scores. It excludes those with September, 1981 pretests or those with makeups on the April, 1982 posttest.

Source: Final Evaluation, Table 22

TABLE 3

New York City

Reading Achievement by Gates and Comparison-Group Students

Grade	Group	Pretest date	Posttest date	N	Observed mean posttest scale score	(S.D.)	Adjusted mean posttest scale score[a]	Grade equivalent
Four/five:	Gates	April, 1981	April, 1982	6,924[b]	422.7	(33.0)	423.3	4.1
	Comparison	April, 1980	April, 1981	6,914	420.6	(33.1)	420.0	4.1
Seven/eight:	Gates	April, 1981	April, 1982	8,659[b]	491.8	(40.3)	491.5	6.4
	Comparison	April, 1980	April, 1981	10,214	494.6	(39.8)	494.2	6.5

[a] Within-grade analyses of covariance were performed to adjust posttest scores; these scores were adjusted to account for some of the differences in pretest levels.

[b] These N's are larger than those in Table 27 because the analysis was perfromed later, on an updated data file.

Source: Final Evaluation, Table 28.

started off at a higher level of achievement, and in addition, they received all of that remedial instruction.

The Gates students who were promoted during the year to grades five and eight performed strikingly better in meeting the promotion standard at the higher level than did the comparison group of low achievers who were socially promoted to the same grades--52% vs. 29% for fifth grade and 58% vs. 40% for eighth. On the surface this evidence seems to be a demonstration of the incapacity of socially promoted students to cope with the higher grade level in contrast with the Gates-fortified group. However, the same problem arises from the comparison of promoted students as was identified in the comparison of retained students. Since only a small proportion of the Gates students were promoted during the year while most of the comparison group were promoted, one would expect the former to have higher initial test scores and as a result higher posttest scores as well. Thus there is no way of knowing whether the higher posttest scores of the promoted Gates students is the result of the Gates Program or of a higher initial achievement level.

What is needed in order to provide a valid comparison between the two groups is a method of controlling for the initial test score of each student. Analysis of covariance is such a technique. Table 3 shows the comparison between the posttest scores of the Gates and control goups when they are adjusted for pretest score. (Promoted and retained students for each grade level are combined in this table.) This procedure statistically approximates Jackson's unbiased third design type for testing the effectiveness of promotion vs. retention, since it controls for maturation and regression (by means of the comparison group) and for prior achievement (by means of analysis of covariance). Unfortunately the net result is that the Gates Program appears to have no noticeable effect on CAT scores that was not also present for the low-achieving students who were retained and socially promoted under the old system.

Thus one is forced to conclude that there is no evidence that students retained and remedially instructed under the Gates Program made any gains in achievement which they would not have made in the absence of both retention and remediation. Considering how much effort was expended under this program to boost achievement in the Gates group, this finding is quite disheartening. Of course, the program may well become more effective over time; it may have a long-run effect on students rather than a short-run effect; it may have an effect on learning that is not measurable by the CATs; and it may have its most significant effect by stimulating the achievement

levels of students who surpass the promotional standard rather than those who don't. But such judgments must await evidence of a different kind from that provided in the first four evaluation reports.

BALTIMORE

The Baltimore public schools put into effect a policy of merit promotion during the 1978-1979 school year. The standard employed is somewhat more flexible than the New York standard, since it includes teacher's evaluation in addition to test scores, and since it allows for a small gray area in which promotion is open to negotiation. The target grades are three to six. For a student in these grades to be promoted, he or she must achieve a minimum score of 70 on the school system's proficiency index. This index is composed of two elements, the student's performance on city-designed proficiency tests in reading, writing and math (56%) and the grades assigned by the student's teacher for the same skill areas (44%). These partial scores are weighted and summed to produce the final score, whose maximum value is 100. A score of 70 or more yields an automatic promotion, a score of less than 60 to 69 sends the case to a promotional committee within the student's school. This committee, consisting of the principal and several teachers, has the power to decide these marginal cases within certain guidelines. Students in grades seven to twelve also take city-designed proficiency tests, but the results are used to determine placement not promotion. However, in order to graduate from high school, a student must score 80 on a state functional reading test and 70 on city proficiency tests in reading, writing and math. ("Promotional Procedures")

There are several points to be made about this system. First, the use of tests designed by the school system makes it more likely that the promotional decision is based on a valid measure of student achievement. Second, a strengthened remediation program was installed as part of the promotional policy. Third, centralization was again an effect of the new policy as the superintendent's office provided the initiative, curriculum, supervision and, of course, the standard. However, the promotional committee in each school provides for a degree of local involvement that was denied in New York, and in addition, the teacher's evaluation

was incorporated into the index.

What about the effects on achievement? The system performed no formal evaluation of the promotional program, but the superintendent did provide some standardized test scores in a paper he wrote on the new policy. (Crews) On the basis of these figures he argues that, "The ten-year decline in test scores halted in 1976-77. Following that year, there has been an accelerated movement of scores toward the national norm each spring." The main problem in interpreting these scores is that the system switched from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) to the CATs in 1978 for grades nine and eleven and in 1981 for grades three, five and seven. Mean grade equivalents rose dramatically during the first CAT year at each grade level, which means that the only valid inter-year comparisons that can be made are for years in which the same test was used.

Table 4 shows the ITBS reading comprehension scores for grades three, five and seven between 1970 and 1980 and also shows the CAT reading scores for grades nine and eleven between 1978 and 1981. Note that in the lower grades scores declined between 1970 and 1976 and then began to increase, as the superintendent said. The problem is that only part of this gain can be associated with the new promotional policy. The scores actually rose higher between 1976 and 1978 than between 1978 and 1980, yet the promotional policy was not installed until 1978. The gains in the first two years are clearly not the result of the policy, and even the gains after 1978 may be the result of whatever caused the earlier growth in achievement. The ITBS scores for ninth and eleventh graders had also been heading downward until 1976, but between 1978 and 1981 the CAT scores rose substantially. This increase may well be the result of the proficiency testing program established for high school graduation in 1978, but without seeing pretest CAT scores (which do not exist) the posttest scores are difficult to interpret.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Washington's merit promotion policy is markedly more flexible than that of either city already discussed. First, a competency-based curriculum was established in the city with the characteristic emphasis on setting clear and observable instructional objectives. Then in 1980 the second element was put in place, the Student Promotional Plan (SPP), which applies to students in grades one through

TABLE 4

Baltimore Achievement Test Scores

Reading Comprehension -- Iowa Test of Basic Skills

Grade	1970	1976	1978	1980
Third	2.9	2.9	3.1	3.2
Fifth	4.6	4.3	4.5	4.6
Seventh	6.5	5.5	5.6	5.7

Reading -- California Achievement Test

Grade	1978	1980	1981
Ninth	8.4	8.9	9.0
Eleventh	9.5	10.0	10.9

Source: Crews

six. Promotions are made semi-annually. If a student achieves 70% mastery of both reading and math according to the instructional objectives for his or her grade, then the student is promoted to the next half grade. If 70% mastery is achieved only for one of the two skill areas, then the student is promoted but is assigned to a special transitional reading or math class. A student who fails to achieve mastery of both skill areas is retained in grade. ("Rules of the Board")

Several points about the program mark it off as quite different from those which preceded it. First, it relies entirely on the teacher's evaluation of whether or not a student has achieved mastery in terms of instructional objectives. Neither national nor local standardized tests appears to play a part in affecting the decision to promote or retain. Second, the introduction of the transitional status between promotion and retention can be interpreted as an attempt to undercut the harshness of a simple pass/fail decision. Note that a student in a transitional class who continues to master one skill and not another can keep being promoted from one transitional class to another indefinitely. Thus the transition classes constitute a slower track paralleling the regular promotional track at all grade levels. Third, a special tutorial and remedial program was instituted along with the SPP, but system literature does not emphasize this part of the program.

In June, 1982, 63% of the students in grades one to six were retained. ("Promotions and Retentions") Table 5 shows that the promotion rate (without deficiency) has been rising since the program's inception, from 47% for first-to-third graders in January, 1981 to 64% in June, 1982. Unfortunately there is no useful information about the effect of this program on student achievement. The system put out an evaluation report but it is not very enlightening. Its major finding is that promoted students had higher test scores than transitional students who in turn had higher scores than retained students. (Final Evaluation)

CHICAGO

Like Washington, Chicago's promotional policy, put in effect in 1981-1982, is a relatively flexible instrument. At its core is the Chicago Mastery Learning Program, which divides the reading curriculum for a given grade into a sequence of units; students are expected to master each unit in turn. The central requirement for

TABLE 5

Washington, D.C.
Comparison of Promotions to Level A or B
Of Elementary School Students
For January 1981, June 1981, January 1982 and June 1982

Grade Level	Promoted to Level A or B			
	Jan 1981[1/]	June 1981[1/]	Jan 1982	June 1982[2/]
1 Percent	59.0%	70.5%	68.2%	71.7%
Number	(4,293)	(5,098)	(4,670)	(4,807)
2 Percent	44.3%	58.3%	60.4%	62.8%
Number	(3,111)	(4,041)	(4,207)	(4,231)
3 Percent	36.5%	49.2%	54.2%	58.2%
Number	(2,630)	(3,508)	(3,747)	(3,997)
Sub-Total				
1-3 Percent	46.7%	59.4%	60.9%	64.2%
Number	(10,034)	(12,647)	(12,624)	(13,035)
4 Percent			48.4%	54.4%
Number			(2,882)	(3,360)
5 Percent			34.0%	47.1%
Number			(2,401)	(3,260)
6 Percent			39.6%	84.6%
Number			(2,713)	(5,849)
Sub-Total				
4-6 Percent			40.2%	62.0%
Number			(7,996)	(12,469)
Grand Total				
1-6 Percent			50.8%	63.2%
Number			(20,620)	(25,504)

1/ Grades four, five and six were not included in the promotion plan until September 1981.

2/ Data on 1,439 students have not been reported for June 1982.

Source: "Promotions and Retentions," Table 8.

promotion in the elementary grades is achieving a minimum mastery of at least 79-83% of these reading units. The judgment of mastery is made by the classroom teacher. The decision to promote or retain is not an automatic one, however, for a wide range of other factors are to be considered--including standardized tests and social, emotional and physical growth. First graders who fail to achieve the appropriate level of mastery are put in a special pre-second grade program, while those in other grades are simply retained. High school students are required to pass criterion-referenced tests in a number of major courses in order to earn promotion, and to graduate, a student must pass a minimum proficiency skills test. ("Promotion Policy," Love) An evaluation study is underway, but there is no information at the present about the impact of the program on achievement.

MILWAUKEE

In September, 1982 the Milwaukee school system simultaneously switched from an ungraded to a graded structure for its elementary schools and instituted a new promotional policy. This policy is the most flexible of the five that have been examined. There are no conditions which require retention, only those in which retention must be considered; but there are situations in which promotion is obligatory. If a student in Kindergarten is not ready for first grade, he or she is to be put into transition class. In first to third grade if students are not reading at a set primer level, they should be considered for retention. In grades four to six a primer level standard is again set, but in addition math and language arts capabilities must be factored into the decision to promote. For all of these grades, the reading level is to be established through an informal questioning of the student by the teacher, with standardized tests used only as a check. As a result this is clearly the most instructionally valid method of measuring achievement encountered thus far. In addition to reading, math and language, promotion decisions must take into consideration such variables as physical, social and emotional maturity, family situation, learning rate and attendance. The use of retention is limited by regulation: no more than one retention is allowed per grade, no more than two in grades one to six, and any student more than two years over age must be promoted. ("Grade Placement," "Guidelines for Reading")

CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION/PART ONE
RAISING PROMOTIONAL STANDARDS: THE IMPACT ON ACHIEVEMENT

The national movement toward raising student promotional standards is rooted in a deep concern about achievement. Educators, parents and the general public are frightened by the widely publicized declines in standardized test scores in recent years and by the growth in the number of high school graduates who have failed to master basic skills. It appears both that schools have been failing to teach and that students have been failing to learn. A policy of merit promotion offers a way out of this dilemma by promising to increase the academic demands which schools place on students and to motivate students to meet these demands. Since the decline in achievement is seen as the result of a relaxation of academic standards, it is felt that an increase in achievement can be brought about by raising the minimum level of competence required to advance from grade to grade.

However, this relationship between promotions and performance appears to be more an article of faith than a proven reality. Research evidence on the subject is wholly inconclusive. Out of more than 50 studies of the relative impact of promotion and retention on student behavior, the large majority had a methodological bias which favored one policy or the other. Under these conditions the only significant finding would be one which runs counter to the bias. For example, in a study of students promoted and retained according to normal school policy, the promoted students are likely to perform better because it is likely that they were better performers in the first place. If such a study were to find that the retained students achieved greater gains, then one would have valid evidence for the efficacy of retention. However, none of the studies produced such a finding; instead results mirrored methodology. The few studies with an unbiased design produced contradictory results. Thus school systems which raised promotional standards in the last few years did not do so on the basis of this policy's demonstrated effectiveness.

The recent elevation of promotional standards in school systems across the country has created a series of natural experiments in which the impact of the program could be tested. Unfortunately, only in the New York Promotional Gates Program did evaluators attempt to take serious advantage of this situation. The final report in New York showed that most retained students made significant achievement gains during the year; but when the researchers established controls for maturation and regression (with a comparison group) and prior achievement level (with an adjustment of posttest scores in light of pretest scores), these gains evaporated. Low achieving students promoted or retained under the more relaxed standards of the old promotional policy raised their achievement levels in one year by the same amount as the Gates students.

The only conclusion one can draw from the current empirical literature is this: there is no valid evidence which demonstrates that either promotion or retention has any significant impact on the low-achieving student. Of course the inability to prove a difference in the effectiveness of these policies does not necessarily mean that no such difference exists. Empirical research is conducted according to conservative rules which require that treatments be considered ineffective until proven otherwise. Under these conditions it takes a large number of carefully controlled studies before clear trends can emerge.

The accumulated research evidence should give pause to the school administrator who is planning to raise promotional standards, for the assumption which underlies such a move--that promotional policies are related to achievement--has never been empirically verified. Given the inconclusiveness of the empirical data, the administrator is forced to consider other grounds for making a decision about whether to proceed or not. A likely source of help in such a choice is theory. For while we do not know in practice whether such a merit promotion policy is effective in raising achievement levels, there are some theoretical grounds for thinking that it might be. These reasons are theoretical in that they are deduced from the assumptions and characteristics of the policy itself rather than being induced from evidence, but they are potentially verifiable through empirical research. If a policy of raising promotional standards does indeed raise student achievement, it is likely to be for the following reasons:

1) Fear of Retention: Such a policy may turn out to have a significant effect in motivating a student to achieve, and also in motivating the student's parents and teachers to help promote such achievement. As I discussed earlier, this motivation is more likely to be negative than positive, representing fear of failure more than pursuit of excellence. In the nineteenth century the apex of the educational pyramid, the high school, was near at hand, and thus the chance at a climb to the top served as a powerful inducement to high levels of achievement. But the expansion of educational opportunity has extended the educational pyramid upward until the apex is located in professional schools--many years removed from students in public school. Thus the positive incentive for achievement in the schools is weaker because of the remoteness of the most attractive educational rewards. Much of what remains in the form of positive incentive to achievement is embodied in the competition for

admission to the city's selective schools, especially Masterman, Girls and Central.

While in the nineteenth century merit promotions encouraged students to look ahead to the chance of reward, the same policy today encourages students to look over their shoulders to the possibility of retention. The negative motivation supplied by the contemporary version of this policy may well be the equal in power to the positive motivation of the old version, but it will most likely affect a different group of students. In the 1980s it is the low-achieving students who are likely to respond to the stimulus since they are the population at risk of retention. In particular, the group most likely to be spurred into action by a merit promotion policy is the group receiving a mid-year letter announcing that retention will occur unless performance improves. One can imagine such a letter galvanizing parents and teachers as well, with potentially beneficial results for the student's achievement.

Consider several implications of this motivational system, which should, I think, make an administrator cautious in applying it in practice. First, retention is only effective as a motivating device for students to the extent that they find it distasteful. Reasons for such a distaste include the unhappiness of being separated from classmates and the shame at being labeled stupid. If students feel this way in anticipation of retention, is it not possible that being compelled to experience retention might have harmful effects on their personal adjustment? Of course, proponents of retention policies argue that retention is not in fact punitive but is remedial. The Gates literature reinforces this notion by referring to the process of failing to meet the promotion standard as "becoming eligible for the Gates Program." Yet one cannot have this issue both ways. If retention is a strong motivating device, then retentions are likely to be fewer, but the students retained are more likely to experience it as punishment. If retention is a weak motivating device, the effect on the student is likely to be more remedial than punitive, but the number retained is likely to be large. No school system wants to make retention harshly unpleasant simply in

order to scare students into passing. The thrust of most of the merit promotion policies studied in this paper was to make the holdover year a fruitful and pleasant experience. What I am arguing is that such laudable efforts have the effect of undercutting some of the motivational power exerted by retention.

Second, while the fear of retention may motivate the low-achieving student, it is likely to have little or no effect on the average or superior student whose scores are comfortably within the passing range. Thus this is not a strategy aimed at raising the minimum level of all students. Third, the focus on motivation assumes that the problem of underachievement derives from lack of motivation in the first place. Thus to the extent that poor test scores are the result of class background, racial discrimination, family conditions, test invalidity and other such causes--the student's motivation is irrelevant, and retention will not spur the student to higher achievement. Fourth, the news that a child is in danger of failing is likely to have an effect on most parents, but the way in which this effect is transmitted to the child may vary considerably. Some parents, who interpret the problem as academic, may seek to help the student with his or her work; but others, who interpret the problem as disciplinary, may be more likely to punish the student. At home as at school, merit promotion poses a choice between remediation and punishment.

2) Enhanced Remedial Instruction: If raised promotional standards do have an effect on achievement, it has been largely the result of the enhanced remediation which, in recent years, has tended to accompany it. Retained students may be confronted with smaller classes, specially trained and motivated teachers, new curricula and more supervisory interest than they experienced in their regular classrooms. School systems have a strong incentive to stress the instructional component of retention in order to underscore the therapeutic rather than punitive aim of the policy. The intense public and political interest in raising promotional standards may turn out to be a very effective lever for prying loose public funds to pay for this increased level of instruction. In New York the school system succeeded in acquiring a sizeable initial commitment of funds from the city for raising

standards, most of which went to pay for remediation. Unfortunately, this investment did not appear to pay off in the form of achievement gains.

3) Focusing Attention on Achievement: Even if the first two factors are not operative, raising promotional standards may have a positive impact on student achievement simply as a slogan. Such a slogan could serve as a rallying point for people interested in increasing the stress on achievement within the schools by a variety of means in addition to or even apart from promotional standards. In a report written on promotion and retention for the Philadelphia schools, Reiter sees such a value in a strict retention policy even though his reading of the literature shows social promotion to be superior in practice:

> At this point in our School District's history, it appears that another swing of the promotion-policy pendulum--back toward stricter requirements--might serve as a slogan or symbol under which our zeal for effective education can be renewed. Its slogan value is not destroyed by the fact that a strict retention policy in itself has been found somewhat less effective than a policy favoring social promotion.
>
> Even if research has found it to be less than ideal, no slogan can be "all bad" if its use as a rallying cry indirectly facilitates the really effective classroom conditions under which each child is stimulated to attain his own highest possible level of attainment. (Reiter, 1973)

4) Simulated Achievement and Teaching to the Test: It is possible that a policy of raised promotional standards could improve test scores, thus giving the impression of progress, without affecting real achievement. To the extent that a school system devotes time and effort to train students for a particular test, it may be short-changing broader educational objectives but it will raise test scores. Coaching and practice do help students perform better on standardized tests, from the CATs to the MCATs. Ideally, schools seek to

improve achievement and then measure the improvement with a test. But as soon as promotion becomes contingent on a test score, it may turn out to be more efficient to work on improving the test score and then to attribute the gain to a gain in achievement. Thus the strongest argument for not relying on a single test as the promotional standard is the wish to keep the tail from wagging the dog.

CONCLUSION/PART TWO
RAISING PROMOTIONAL STANDARDS: SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

At this moment the tide is moving toward high promotional standards in this country. Many school systems have already adopted such a policy, and many which have not probably will do so soon. Under these conditions it may not be realistic to close this paper with a discussion of whether a school system should adopt tougher standards or stay with social promotion. The trend toward the former is so strong that even in systems which have not changed formal promotion policy, we see retention rates rising as a result of informal adjustment. Philadelphia's school board and administration have made no policy changes, yet as Table 1 shows, there has been a steady increase in the number of students held back in the last decade. The reason is that individual schools have begun raising standards on their own, and this year an entire district will take the plunge (District Six, in the northwest part of the city). Given this situation, I felt that it would be most useful to conclude with some suggestions for how a policy of raised promotion standards could be implemented--drawing on the experience of other school systems and reflecting the concerns expressed earlier in this paper.

1) A Flexible Promotional Standard: At a bare minimum this means not relying on a single score of a single test, as New York does. In the interest of being less punitive and more suited to the needs of the individual student, the standard should be constructed from multiple measures--including curriculum-based tests and teacher's evaluation--and should leave room for appeal to a higher authority. Examples of such policies are found in Milwaukee and Chicago.

2) A Valid Measure of Achievement: Since the process of learning for every student is located within a particular curriculum and a particular mode of instruction, the most valid measure of that student's achievement is the one which best reflects the special character of this learning process. The model for such validity is the individual informal questioning technique used by Milwaukee teachers to establish a student's reading level (although this validity is obtained at the expense of city-wide uniformity); the least valid measure is the most uniform, a nationally distributed standardized test. In between the two extremes is a city-designed achievement test geared to the curriculum in use.

3) A Rigorous Evaluation of Effectiveness: Raised promotional standards are usually put in place under conditions where much has been promised and much is

expected. People inside and outside the system want to see achievement levels go up and quickly as a result of the new policy. The temptation is great to give people what they want by presenting only the rosiest data, by failing to employ statistical controls and even, perhaps, by inflating scores. One way around this problem is for the interested parties to agree in advance on a method of evaluation and on what findings will constitute success or failure. If the program simply does not work, there should be contingency plans for changing it or scrapping it.

4) More Than Just Basics: If grade schoolers have difficulty developing a basic competency in reading and math, then they should receive special help in these areas at the expense of other subjects; likewise with high school students lacking functional literacy skills. However, I wish to argue that if we take these ideas about correcting learning deficiencies to the logical extreme, we will boil the entire curriculum down to its most basic level, and in the process produce new kinds of deficiencies. One would be a deficiency of interest, since time in school would increasingly be spent on narrowly focused exercises and drills. Another would be a deficiency of breadth and complexity, while ideally schooling should be expansive and challenging.

5) Include the Average Student: While concentrating on raising the level of the low-achieving student up to a minimum competency, we must not forget the achievement needs of the average student. Minimum competency testing can easily lead to a pass/fail mentality in which those who pass begin to coast, since they feel that no more is expected of them. If higher promotional standards are adopted, it should be as part of a much broader orientation toward high achievement for all students. Without this, a policy of raising standards for the poorest students can have the ironic effect of debasing standards for the rest of the class.

6) Emphasize Instruction over Retention: As in all things related to schools, instruction should come first. Retention should be seen as a way of motivating students to learn and as a way of allocating instructional

resources, but it should not become an end in itself. It is all too easy in the midst of establishing promotional standards to become lost in the complexities of testing, in the fine-tuning of regulations, and in the selling of the program and to forget about the special instructional needs one has created by means of these standards. Retention puts students on the slow track, and only instruction can get them out of it.

7) Effective Schools: Ultimately what matters most to student achievement is not one promotional policy or another but the overall effectiveness of the schools in carrying out their mission. Milwaukee's Project RISE (Rising to Individual Scholastic Excellence) is an example of a broad-based program which puts together many of the suggestions made here and does so in such a way that it makes promotional policy peripheral rather than central. (The program was established before the introduction of the system's promotional policy, and thus is independent of it.) Beginning with the firm belief that the school by itself can make a difference with the low income, low-achiever, RISE systematically emphasizes all of the factors which its organizers see as characteristic of a truly effective school: grade level achievement, expectations for all students, an orderly learning climate, instructional leadership by the principal, basic skill orientation, frequent inservice training, the establishment of curriculum objectives, regular homework, student identification with the school, heterogeneous ability grouping, direct and structured instruction, concentration on time on task and a commitment to mastery learning.

This study has focused on the two methods by which students historically have been moved through the graded structure of American schooling--merit promotion and social promotion. These systems differ both in their degree of emphasis on achievement and in their assumptions about student capabilities. Merit promotion, both the old and new versions, is strongly oriented toward spurring achievement, while social promotion tends to place achievement at a lower priority than such concerns as social adjustment and continuous progress. At the same time merit promotion is based on the expectation that students have widely varying degrees of ability, while social promotion perceives students at the same age as having relatively uniform capacities for learning. In this

sense the two systems can be seen as mirror images of each other: merit promotion combines elevated expectations about achievement with hierarchical notions of ability, while social promotion combines lower expectations for achievement with egalitarian assumptions about ability. Both systems foster the belief that there is a strong positive association between individual differentiation and excellence, between equality of skills and mediocrity of performance.

Although this belief has dominated American public schooling from its earliest days to the present, alternative models of education do exist which challenge it. Perhaps the most influential such alternative is provided by Benjamin Bloom (1976) through his notion of mastery learning. Bloom not only argues that students are broadly similar in their capacity for learning, thus denying the hierarchical assumptions implicit in merit promotion, but he also argues that their capacity extends to complete mastery of the knowledge we want them to acquire, thus denying the minimalist expectations implicit in social promotion. He sees no contradiction between equality and excellence because he attributes the wide variations in student performance to instructional failure--the failure to focus on each student's areas of individual need--rather than to the inability of students to learn.

In the absence of evidence clearly defining one form of promotional policy to be the most effective, the choice of merit promotion or social promotion or some alternative program such as mastery learning must be made on the basis of social values. If we do not know which policy provides a system of instruction that is technically superior, we must at least choose a policy whose implicit values are congruent with our own. Any policy that is implemented, whichever direction it leans, will involve critical value choices whose consequences will be felt for a long time to come. We are still experiencing the effects of the last decision about promotional policy.

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